

Targeted placement for people with disabilities in Italy: a perspective from Lombardian companies

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Abstract

Purpose – The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes the right of disabled people to access work. Against this legislative backdrop, this study explores the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian system of targeted placement for disabled people, based on Law 68/1999, which delegates to regional authorities the management of the labor market. The examination centers on the perspective of companies, the primary stakeholders in the inclusion of persons with disabilities within organizational structures.

Design/methodology/approach – The article discusses the results of focus groups conducted with 28 managers of large, medium and small enterprises in Lombardy (Italy). Qualitative analysis was employed, and the results were structured using a simplified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis, incorporating practical recommendations.

Findings – The analysis leads to practical suggestions to improve the entire targeted placement process at the regional level, from selection and accompaniment to evaluation, such as improving the networking of local stakeholders who deal with the inclusion of disabled people, homogeneity of the procedures in different regions, making all employees aware of diversity management, etc. The territorial network and the welfare environment are particularly important in achieving a successful targeted placement and to promote an inclusive corporate culture.

Research limitations/implications – This study is not representative of Italy as a whole, as it remains a qualitative investigation focused on a single region.

Originality/value – This contribution accomplishes an in-depth study of the law of labor inclusion of people with disabilities observed from the point of view of companies, which are still usually reluctant to integrate people with disabilities into their organizations or encounter difficulties in doing so.

Keywords Disabilities, Disabled workers, Organizational culture, Companies, Targeted employment, Diversity management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: targeted placement in Italy and the research purpose

Article 27 of the [United Nations \(UN\) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(2006\)](#) states that disabled people must have “the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities”. Many research studies highlight that, for people with disabilities, employment is very important. For example, being employed reduces the risk of isolation and poverty ([Schur, 2002](#)), supports health and well-being ([Vornholt et al., 2018](#)) and roles at work are still important today to build social identity ([Ferrucci, 2014](#)). In addition, work is also a source of meaning in people’s lives ([Hasselkus and Rosa, 1997](#)); as [Saunders and Nedelec \(2014\)](#) write, “As paid work is the activity that people spend the most amount of their time doing, it is an important provider of meaning” (p. 101). However, in terms of



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employment, persons with disabilities are an underemployed group of the workforce (Colella and Bruyère, 2011). In Italy in 2019, in the age group between 15 and 64, 32.2% of the disabled were employed, suffering from serious limitations, compared to 59.8% of non-disabled persons (Corte dei Conti, 2022).

States, therefore, must create the conditions for the labor market to integrate disabled people.

The European Union's (EU's) Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 asserts that participation in employment is the best way to ensure social inclusion. To ensure this participation, the strategy identifies employment as one of the five policy priorities for future actions. It establishes three specific goals: (1) increasing the employment rate of persons with disabilities and reducing the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people; (2) improving the capacity of employment services to support persons with disabilities and create networks with other organizations, including associations of the disabled and (3) facilitating self-employment and entrepreneurship through legal and financial support, including EU funds.

In Italy, the employment of persons with disabilities falls under Law 68 of March 12, 1999 (and its subsequent integrations, e.g. the 2015 Jobs Act [1]). This law redesigned the system of quotas (reserving at least 7% of their workforce for disabled workers) and sheltered employment and introduced new mechanisms of job inclusion, such as agreements between companies and social cooperatives, as well as defining hiring incentives, sanctions and prohibiting discrimination. The law also emphasizes the importance of education and vocational training for individuals with disabilities and supports the building of local networks between public institutions, companies and third-sector organizations (e.g. social cooperatives, voluntary associations and user-led organizations) in order to achieve better social inclusion [2]. Article 14 enables the fulfillment of this obligation outside the conventional framework of direct employment. Simultaneously, it facilitates job opportunities for a particularly vulnerable segment of the disabled population who would otherwise have limited prospects for gainful employment:

In order to promote the employment of disadvantaged and disabled workers, the services referred to in Article 6(1) of Law No 68/1999 (. . .) shall draw up with the most representative national trade unions of employers and employees and with the associations representing, assisting and protecting cooperatives (. . .) and with the consortia, framework conventions on a territorial basis, which must be validated by the regions (. . .), concerning the assignment of work orders to the social cooperatives themselves by member or affiliated enterprises. (art. 14 Law 68 of March 12, 1999)

Even though Law 68/1999 is national in scope, its implementation depends almost exclusively on regional and provincial administrations and on their ability to effectively coordinate the various actors involved in this process – companies, territorial disabled placement services, agencies, social cooperatives, trade unions and disabled people's associations – which can, in fact, operate in a more or less virtuous way in terms of the suitability of a working environment, overcoming complex bureaucratic processes compromised by strictly medical assessments of impairment (Corbisiero, 2014). This fact leads to problems and disparities at the local level. In some regions, also taking into account non-supportive environmental and socio-welfare factors, the employment services for persons with disabilities are inefficient (Agovino and Rapposelli, 2013; 2016); in other regions, competent networks are present and innovative procedures are implemented. This is the case in Lombardy, where a regional law offers additional tools and resources to improve the employment of disabled people. The region also witnesses robust cooperation among different actors, which allows the sharing of good practices that can enhance the national law, even if this model risks remaining excessively fragmented at the territorial level and not

always aligning with the needs of disabled workers and businesses. Therefore, even efficient regions still have to develop a strong culture of social inclusion on the demand side of the labor market (Agovino and Rapposelli, 2017), work on the environment in terms of openness of social capital and develop social-welfare factors, such as curriculum counseling, empowerment training, educational services, attentive listening and mobility (Agovino and Rapposelli, 2014, 2020). Furthermore, it entails the promotion of a multitude of organizations offering support services and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Agovino and Rapposelli, 2012).

In relation to this contextual framework, this article discusses the results of a study conducted by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan and financed by the Association of Enterprises of the Provinces of Milan, Lodi, Monza-Brianza and Pavia (Assolombarda) [3]. The study aimed to evaluate the implementation of Law 68/1999 in the districts served by Assolombarda. The research was carried out following a participatory approach with the team from Assolombarda's work and pension offices, focusing on the companies' role and their point of view in the network.

Peculiarities of the Italian targeted placement of people with disabilities in the European context

EU countries share the belief that legislation is required to reduce employment discrimination against people with disabilities. However, services and projects aimed at placing disabled people in work are very different across the continent. Scaratti *et al.* (2018) have shown that these differences depend on the features of national welfare systems. By developing the well-known Esping-Andersen (1990) framework, Scaratti *et al.* (2018) have identified five European welfare models: Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, continental, Mediterranean and post-communist.

Tschanz and Staub (2017) have analyzed the implementation of three dimensions of disability policies – social protection, labor market integration and social rights – across different European welfare systems. They thus identified four clusters. The first covers the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia and exhibits moderate social protection, labor market integration and few social rights. The second cluster comprises Austria, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where disability policies are mainly oriented toward activation and rehabilitation. The third cluster is represented by the Nordic countries, where disability policies reach a high level in all three dimensions. Finally, the fourth cluster is made up of Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Spain. In these countries, considerable attention is paid to social protection rather than labor market integration (activation and rehabilitation).

Regardless of these differences, 20 EU countries adopt a quota system whereby companies must employ a certain proportion of people with disabilities. Alternatively, they have to make a financial contribution to the companies. The six European nations with the lowest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people – Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Slovenia – all implement a quota system (Richard and Hennekam, 2021) to stimulate action by companies.

Although the instrument is the same, there are many differences in its implementation. The first one concerns the proportion of disabled people that must be employed. For example, in Italy, the quota ranges from one person to 7% of the workforce. In Germany, the quota is 5% of people with severe disabilities. In France, it is 3%. Another difference relates to the annual compensation for each mandatory job for a person with a disability that was not staffed. This figure ranges from 0.25% to 4% of the monthly salary. This penalty does not seem to be effective, as the rate of compliance with the law is between 25% (Spain) and 67% (France) (Wuellrich, 2010).

In many EU countries, when a person cannot be employed in the open labor market, they can obtain sheltered employment. This is “an alternative to mainstream employment for those individuals who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to secure or remain in employment as a direct result of exclusionary practices attributed to their disability” (Bend and Priola, 2021, p. 3). However, Cueto and Rodriguez (2014) found that sheltered employment limits disabled people’s chances to enter the labor market.

In Italy, the passing of Law 68/1999 represented an important cultural and policy shift in the support of people with vulnerabilities. The main change was the transition to a model of employment that places the person and their different abilities at the center of the intervention. This new model is called “targeted employment.” The new system depends on regions’ actions and ability to efficiently coordinate the various actors involved in the work integration of disabled people. According to the law, work requests should be addressed to the employment services for disabled people in the district where the company is located. This procedure aims to facilitate the intersection between the needs of the company and those of the person with a disability. “According to the principle of targeted employment (see Article 2 Law 68/99), the disabled person should be placed in a job position compatible with his/her health status and professional characteristics, and useful to the productive needs of the organization” (Agovino *et al.*, 2019, p. 298). To take advantage of the benefits provided by this law, persons with disabilities must be included in targeted employment lists held by the Provincial Employment Services. As illustrated above, Law 68/1999 established the system of employment quotas. According to Parodi (2006), the lawmakers assumed that without quotas, disabled people would find it more difficult to enter the labor market, especially due to the perception that they are less productive than non-disabled workers. Public and private firms with more than 35 employees may apply for exemption from targeted employment if the work involved is burdensome and dangerous or requires special procedures. If the company does not observe the quota, it must pay a daily tax to the regional fund for the employment of people with disabilities. To encourage job placements, the law provides incentives to companies that hire disabled people. Furthermore, the regional funds support employment interventions and the adaptation of workplaces.

To increase the chances of employment for persons with disabilities, the law includes various types of agreements that create many paths to job inclusion. One type of agreement (former article 11; program conventions [4]) is stipulated between the provincial targeted employment services and public and private companies to plan the hiring of disabled people according to multi-year programs aimed at covering the quota. These programs allow employers to choose the timing of the job placements and the methods of recruitment (IRS, 2019). Article 14 of Law 68/1999 establishes the possibility of a territorial “framework agreement” to place individuals with severe disabilities in a protected context. Companies that take part in this agreement can award contracts to social cooperatives that employ workers with disabilities, who are then counted as part of the company’s quota. A plurality of subjects is involved in this type of agreement: the provincial employment services for the disabled; national employers’ and workers’ associations; social cooperatives that employ vulnerable individuals (known in Italy as type B cooperatives) and their associations; and consortia of social cooperatives. Each framework agreement must identify the group of people to include and the quota that can be achieved. For this reason, depending on where they are implemented, these agreements cover different types of disability, degrees of impairment and quota percentages.

As required by Article 14 of Law 68/1999, Lombardy’s regional administration has set up a fund to support job placement services for people with disabilities. The fund finances services such as

- (1) Tutoring disabled people who seek employment;

- (2) Training within the company aimed at including the person with a disability;
- (3) Promoting a culture of inclusion at the provincial level;
- (4) Offering technical assistance.

The regional authority also earmarks some resources for networking activities aimed at provincial employment services, territorial social services, health services, third-sector organizations, companies, social cooperatives and educational institutions. The idea here is that improving the inclusion of people with disabilities is possible only through partnerships and networking (Regional Law 13/2003).

What role do companies play in the Italian context?

To improve economic growth and social cohesion, the EU follows the flexicurity model (European Commission, 2006, 2007). This model represents a “third way” (Agovino and Rapposelli, 2020) between the flexibility of the Anglo-Saxon liberal labor market and the job security and social safety nets of southern European and Scandinavian countries (Madsen, 2004, 2007). Flexicurity requires a combination of active labor market policies and social protection systems. As Martin and Grubb (2001) have explained, it is important to create a connection between active and passive labor market policies to improve the well-being of vulnerable people, thus increasing their chances of gaining employment.

Many researchers have observed the role played by public institutions in the promotion of disabled people's employment in terms of active labor market policies. Less attention has been paid to the role of companies, despite these actors representing a key factor in the inclusion of vulnerable individuals in the workplace. A study conducted by Nota *et al.* (2014), based on Stone and Colella (1996), highlighted which variables influence the choices of potential employers regarding disabled workers. An important variable concerns the type of disability. Employers exhibit more negative attitudes toward people with psychological problems than toward people with sensory or cognitive disabilities. As psychological problems are usually poorly understood by the public, they might be associated with stigma and fear (Pingani *et al.*, 2021). It is thus necessary to improve companies' knowledge of different types of disabilities. Another variable concerns the presentation of the candidate to the employer, which should go beyond their disability. This is a task for the provincial offices in partnership with the local social and health services. Presenting the candidate more comprehensively could make the skills of the disabled person the driving force behind effective employment opportunities. A new attention to the world of disability in the private sector is testified by the increased use of disability management, which, as a result of workforce diversity, leads to valuable opportunities but also plays a proactive role in addressing broader societal needs. This includes promoting inclusivity and improving the quality of life for individuals facing challenging circumstances (Castelnuovo, 2020, p. 92). Since 2015, thanks also to the economic incentives provided by the Jobs Act, the use of permanent contracts has increased once more (Polis Lombardia, 2018). This evidence urges scholars to consider companies not only as actors who are forced to hire disabled people but also as interested and expert interlocutors who can create an effective network on the ground to improve disabled people's employment.

The Lombardy case: challenges and opportunities for companies

This study explores the role of Lombardy's companies in the job placement process for people with psycho-physical disabilities [5]. Specifically, the study investigates (1) the strengths, (2) the weaknesses and (3) the proposals for the improvement of targeted employment within the framework of Law 68/1999 and its updates from the companies' perspective. The goal is to

compile a series of in-depth evaluations from which to start developing ideas for the improvement of current regulations on mandatory placement, especially its application in Lombardy. The opportunity to contribute to the updating of Law 68/1999 has recently emerged as part of Resolution XI/1792, which the regional administration passed in January 2021. This resolution promotes listening to stakeholders, collecting suggestions from them and implementing initiatives that can improve the existing law.

Methodology

We conducted focus groups to collect companies' experiences of the critical aspects of the targeted employment system. 3 focus groups were carried out with 28 managers from 22 member companies of Assolombarda, and 8 organizations were specifically involved in order to understand Article 14 agreements. There were three criteria for inclusion: enterprise size (small, medium and large), geographical location (provinces of Milan, Monza-Brianza, Lodi and Pavia); economic sector (energy, mechanics, pharmaceuticals, food, informatics, manufacturing, services, design and consulting). All the companies had a decade of experience in job placement and the professional guidance of people with psycho-physical disabilities.

Data collection and analysis

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups were carried out between 1/06/2020 and 31/10/2020 using Microsoft Teams, which allows group calls to be video-recorded. The duration of each focus group session extended to approximately two hours. The interview guide focused on the following issues: disabled people's inclusion management (challenges and solutions), coaching of the disabled during the work placement; the relationship between the company and the cooperative, the disabled person's workplace (at the company or the cooperative), the activities proposed for disabled people, the advantages for the various actors involved (i.e. companies, cooperatives and workers), the evolution of the services on offer and areas for improvement.

The data were analyzed with content analysis (Roller, 2019) to identify the most important topics and recurring terms. A qualitative (hermeneutic) analysis (Assarroudi *et al.*, 2018) of the transcripts was also carried out to highlight salient categories; the researchers did not use software for the transcripts of recordings, and no software was used for the in-depth analysis of the interviews. Once the main concepts had been identified, the researchers proceeded to organize them into macro and micro categories (see Table 1 for the categories' organization). A simplified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) framework (Benzaghta *et al.*, 2021) was adopted as it allows researchers to highlight the critical issues and the strengths of the topic under investigation. The framework also helps to formulate suggestions for improvement based on relevant challenges and opportunities. The results are organized following the SWOT areas (so we will present "the strengths," "the difficulties" and "the proposal to improve the placement of disabled people in companies"); within each section, the study will describe how the meaning of the category tree is articulated.

Findings

(1) The strengths of targeted placements

Regarding the *legislative conditions for targeted placement* [1], a best practice refers to the many tools that can be used to comply with the law's obligation, which include not only internal relocation strategies but also outsourcing. In the latter case, the interviewees explained that multi-assignments have been made by using Article 14 agreements (Law 68/

1. Legislative conditions for targeted placement

Types of available financial tools [1.1] With Law No. 68/99 and following specifications the legislator has introduced various financial tools for “targeted” placement and in particular Article No. 14 appears to be a means of fulfilling the obligation of growing interest also in terms of value for money (savings) for companies. The Region also grants dowries and tax bonuses under certain conditions

Flexibility of tools [1.2] The flexibility of the tools appears to be an element on which to improve: the times are too stringent and there is a double threshold between those who are hired as disabled and those who become disabled during their working life (46 and 60%) that no longer appears neither justified nor realistic. The algorithm by convention Article No. 14 could be raised, while the percentage of people to be hired should be adjusted to the other European states and the percentage of exemption should also be increased

2. Diversity management

Companies culture [2.1] The corporate culture has also developed thanks to forward-looking HR managers and when it is effective based on inclusion, acceptance, integration and growth opportunities for companies and disabled people, there are still companies in which placement is instead mainly experienced as an imposition or a task

Relationship with colleagues [2.2] The relationship with colleagues is a central aspect of integration, showing them how the contribution of people to companies is fundamental

Self-stigma and prejudice [2.3] The stigma is carried out by the disabled themselves (as also happens to cancer patients): this implies the difficulty in approaching the discourse with people who could already be included in the disabled protection legislation. The occupational physician can be a decisive support resource

Personnel selection and matching [2.4] Selection and matching are sometimes difficult for small family businesses that cannot differentiate tasks or because disabled people do not accept positions, they do not consider appropriate. The lack of support from public bodies forces independent scouting, also because the employment centers do not always update the lists with those who are really looking for work

3. Tutor’s role

Monitoring and evaluation of individualized project [3.1] Company tutors promote a better integration of disabled workers, especially in its initial phase. The role is also important for more technical tasks and specific forms of disability and the need for prolonged support

Lifelong learning and accompaniment [3.2] Training and active policies accompany the disabled person’s project from integration and subsequently also in the case of a change of job or company

Mediation with professionals and caregiver [3.3] The tutor has a decisive role in keeping in touch with both professionals and caregivers

4. Relationship with territory

Public and private organization involvement [4.1] Networking is fundamental and, in some cases, it is to be implemented further, even with respect to the associations of disabled people involved, it could also be useful for companies to have further help in identifying accredited cooperatives

Homogeneity of procedures [4.2] There is a disorienting inhomogeneity at regional and national level of procedures also with respect to bureaucratic times and ICT/digital interlocution, with different management systems of the provincial lists of targeted placements

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 1.
Tree categories and
subcategories of
content analysis

99) [1.1], which were generally perceived as an excellent tool. Compared to the costs of the company tutor, the quality/price ratio, the production times and the costs of the workers were all appreciated (the contract with the social cooperative applies to them). The participants were in favor of increasing the percentage of disabled people hired through this mechanism [1.2].

Concerning the *diversity management* [6] [2] (specifically the companies' cultures), "inclusion" was an important theme in the focus groups, despite the difficulties of integrating workers. Diversity management emerged as "the inclusion and enhancement of diversity," which was understood as the desire to promote the skills (no matter how few) of the person with a disability. A desire to overcome an approach based on obligation and see the inclusion of disabled people as a positive challenge for the company was also manifested [2.1]. Obviously, the work integration of the person with disabilities in the company also involves the inclusion of the person with disabilities with other colleagues: inclusion, in fact, means creating an environment in which each person, with his/her unique characteristics, is valued and respected. In this sense, all actions to raise awareness, even in the corporate organizational context, are an important strategy to create a "culture of disability" and, at the same time, improve the possibility of success of the work projects that involve disabled people [2.2]:

when the activity is resolved exclusively in a very close relationship between the company and the disabled person there is a high risk . . . if instead the order activity is carried out with a team of people within which the disabled person finds his space and his professionalization path . . . then I would say that there is a greater probability that there is a good perception of the quality of the service on the part of the company and let's say that perhaps there are fewer risks connected to the person's lack of support. (Manager, Company 2).

In recent years, human resources managers have tried to inform employees about the possibilities offered by the state to protect people who are already in the workforce by recognizing their psycho-physical fragility.

Another central concern was conducting a thorough analysis of the tasks to be carried out by the person with a disability before their placement. To achieve effective matches, it is essential to assess people carefully from the beginning and then punctually collect information on the process, thus highlighting the different outcomes from a qualitative perspective [2.4].

With reference to the *tutor's role* [3], as one manager said, "*It is essential that these people are constantly monitored by specific individuals who can help them grow professionally and support the company that must include the disabled*" (Manager, Company 1) [3.1]. The disabled person must be supported throughout their entire professional path, and the manager and colleagues are key to this support [3.2]. "*It is important to show employees that these people can really make contributions: to see with their own eyes that disabled people can make contributions, it is very useful for the workforce*" (Manager, Company 3). The "keystone" of a successful experience was the good collaboration between the placement organization and the disabled person's tutor, who can act as an important mediator when difficulties arise [3.3].

Moving to the fourth category, the *relationship with territory* [4], an important issue that strongly emerged concerned the relationship with the territory and the collaboration with the network of parties based on the mediation of new types of staff. Some companies (e.g. in the provinces of Monza and Milan) reported good experiences with targeted placements. However, the general opinion was that there was too much bureaucracy, little awareness of the critical issues and a lack of desire to experiment with new solutions. The participants said that a crucial need for them was having access to experienced third-party contacts with which they could discuss potential problems. Another useful activity that was mentioned was the enhancement of the network with territorial actors, including accredited bodies, the disabled

subcommittee, the work commission and the working table on disability and employment. Carrying out relevant conversations with these actors was seen as a form of consultancy and cooperation [4.1], including help with adapting the workplace environment to the disabled workers' needs.

(2) The difficulties of integrating disabled people into companies

Illustrating the weaknesses of the *legislative conditions* [1], most companies considered Law 68/1999 to be dated and the process too bureaucratic. The large number of subjects to be hired sometimes triggers opportunistic mechanisms. Some companies talked of a “bad challenge” as they failed to comply with the rules. The legislation offers certain tools to obtain the best results, but the process often remains too complicated [1.2 – *Flexibility of tools*]. This is the case for the employment of specialized workers, who often have to stand at their workstations for long periods of time or must possess considerable experience. There is also little knowledge (and consequently little use) of financial incentives, even those for the elimination of architectural barriers, which are read as “consumption” interventions rather than preventive ones [1.1]. Based on the insights derived from the experiences shared in the focus group discussions, when a company undertakes the calculation of potential penalties, it demonstrates an awareness of the significance of hiring individuals. Consequently, the company initiates efforts to pursue this objective, even if these efforts are primarily motivated by instrumental considerations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that certain enterprises opt to remit the stipulated penalties, justified by their relatively nominal monetary value, instead of embarking on the more challenging endeavor of recruiting individuals with disabilities, which is too often perceived as an obstacle [1.1].

For the *diversity management programs* [2], sometimes it is particularly difficult to have a positive development in terms of diversity management. Small family businesses that are focused on their core business may fail to differentiate the tasks for disabled people. Larger companies often experience placement as an imposition. Other businesses are always concerned about not having everything under control [2.1]. In small companies, some managers may be prejudiced and refuse candidates who meet the necessary requirements, trying to pass on the responsibility to others [2.3]. As the manager of Company 4 explained, “*the difficulty is convincing the entrepreneur of the importance of also hiring people with important disabilities.*” Stigma and self-prejudice also make it difficult for company employees to participate in the process. “*Many workers refuse to contribute by accepting the [disabled] label for fear of being considered people who have fewer skills*” (Manager, Company 6) [2.3]. This is especially the case with psychological disabilities, for which diagnoses and certifications are not easily issued.

Finding the individuals for the placements remains a major problem. Even with the help of a recruiting company, there is very little time to make the placement [2.4]. As one manager (Company 8) put it, “*the legislation is like a sword of Damocles.*” For this reason, the internal selection of a disabled person is often preferred to contain costs, but even this option creates problems related to self-stigma and companies' culture of meritocracy and competitiveness. At the same time, there is the problem that many companies have unrealistic expectations regarding the skills of a person with a disability: “*I have to include a person . . . and therefore the same characteristics that I look for in an able-bodied person must be those that I look for a protected category*” (Company 2) [2.4]. Another weakness in the system regards the *relationship with the territory* [4] and its lack of uniformity in the approaches and procedures adopted in the different provinces, which extends to the interpretation of the legislation [4.2]. This influences the placement process and creates fragmentation. Companies with sites in different provinces, for example, find this situation particularly difficult. Furthermore, some territories lack intermediaries [4.1]. Sometimes, the company's labor consultant tries to

maintain a direct line with the province but finds closed offices and staff who are unwilling to solve problems or issue permits. This makes it more difficult to customize of employment to meet the needs of both businesses and individuals with disabilities.

(3) Proposals to improve the placement of disabled people in companies

From the focus group analyses, it appears that, with respect to the first category (*legislative conditions* [1]), to guarantee its uniform application across the country, Law 68/1999 needs to be revised. A first step could be the creation of a single, national interlocutor that can guarantee the homogeneity of procedures and forms [1.1; 4.2]. The tools should also be simplified, making the process more manageable for companies that wish to have an approach that goes beyond legal obligations. This would allow them to seize the placements' opportunities.

Another important aspect concerns the need to provide tools for the employment of disabled people that are in line with the socio-economic transformations underway [1.2]. The stakeholders suggested that the percentage of people to be hired should be reduced and brought in line with that of other European countries, and the percentage of people with disabilities to be included according to Article 14 could be reduced too. There can be other situations in which an employee becomes disabled during work.

As for the possibility included in Article 18 [7], a different path should be provided that includes ad hoc support and specific legislation, thus separating this issue from Law 68/1999.

With regard to personnel selection and matching (*diversity management* [2]), it would also be desirable to carefully revise the lists of compulsory placements, as people with severe disabilities should be offered other solutions that are consistent with their specific situations [2.4]. The employment centers should also verify that the people on the lists are actually looking for work: in fact, in many cases, the problem is that the employment lists are not up-to-date, or have people who, once contacted, are no longer willing to be placed in the company. Constant updating of the lists (both in terms of people to be eliminated [8] but also to be added) is considered a simple, concrete proposal, but at the same time essential to speed up the matching processes with companies [2.4].

A particularly strategic aspect of the placement of people with disabilities is *the relationship with the territory* [4] and the collaboration with the network of parties involved, which requires the mediation of professionals [4.1]. According to focus participants, economic investment is thus required in facilitators who can build and maintain the network, which is sometimes poorly integrated. This is not an easy task, given the heterogeneity of the actors involved (e.g. public employment offices, public and private intermediaries, medical professionals, social services and third-sector associations), but in the meantime, it seems like a good practical strategy to improve the entire system.

Discussion

The participants' opinions show the importance of an overall inclusive logic for companies (Schur *et al.*, 2005; Smith *et al.*, 2004), which includes managers of all areas and at all levels. A widespread and innovative company culture on the disability front appears to be the best strategy: "*we need workplaces with tolerance for persons with mental disorders or other chronic health problems, since working conditions have changed and capacity disorders and sick leave due to mental disorders increased*" (Vornholt *et al.*, 2018). As Zijlstra *et al.* (2017) highlight, it is necessary to have organizations and workplaces that embrace diversity, first and foremost in terms of employees' capacities. In this sense, the diversity/disability manager (Böhm *et al.*, 2016) appears to be strategic. This person can be crucial not only in relations with the outside world but also in supporting and accompanying organizations in the process from integration to inclusion of disabled people, linking all sectors of the company: it means that

the work system can move from what is provided for by law, i.e. the full participation of the individual in productive activity and his or her personal fulfillment through work (integration, [Boffo, 2012](#)), to inclusion, i.e. the possibility for each individual (regardless of his or her disability status) to be part of the decision-making process and to contribute fully and effectively to the life of organizations ([Harder et al., 2016](#)).

Another important aspect is the fluidity of the communications between the different actors in the territorial network, which is essential to making the system more effective. This can be achieved by making the procedures and forms homogeneous through efficient centralization or coordination. In turn, this will help companies manage the deadlines of the process and the multiple, complex tasks involved in it.

An important role could then be played by the various associations that deal with disabled people ([Mura, 2017](#)). However, these organizations currently seem focused on other issues, such as the health and social inclusion of people with disabilities. Paying attention to job placements would be appropriate so that the disabled may become active subjects of the territorial network. Most associations still have to make a step change with regard to the issue of integrating disabled people into the world of work. They could do more in terms of career guidance, considering the disabled not only as people in need of help but also as individuals full of potential.

In the implementation of the concept of the integration of disabled people into employment, it is also essential that the agreements between institutions, cooperatives and companies are based on a collaboration that extends beyond the initial stages of selecting the person ([Callegari, 2020](#)). It would be desirable to provide moments of one-to-one coaching, monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, once individuals experiencing disadvantages are entrusted to these cooperatives, companies anticipate that the cooperatives will assume responsibility for addressing all aspects of the individual's needs. However, in order to provide effective psychological support, establish emotional and supportive networks and facilitate housing arrangements, it becomes imperative to establish a comprehensive network of both public and private services. This network should involve collaborations among public administrations, local authorities, social service cooperatives (specifically those of type A), volunteer organizations, associations and emerging forms of endogenous social innovation within corporations. Such collaboration is vital to support the training initiatives undertaken by social cooperatives specializing in job placement, thus creating fresh opportunities for education, knowledge exchange and social interaction ([Maiello, 1997](#)). A key element for the success of targeted placement is the combination of information and training. Companies must be informed concerning not only their obligations but also the resources that are available to them to integrate disabled people. An adequate analysis of the potential placement sectors, the skills required and the necessary roles should be linked to a plan of the training on offer to prepare those roles, which companies would then find less difficult to fill. It would also be appropriate to adopt a lifelong learning perspective ([Kauppila et al., 2020](#)) to accompany the disabled person throughout their working career. Furthermore, training should be directed to management (in addition to tutors) in order to create a company-wide environment that is attentive and capable of managing diversity in everyday relationships. This training could be linked to new methods of managing personnel with disabilities. It could focus on how to define the appropriate inclusion context and how to manage workers with disabilities and their relationships with other workers while protecting their privacy. Special emphasis should be placed on the management of people with psychological disabilities, e.g. how to build on their strengths, how to manage their emotional reactions (including aggressive ones) and how to create adequate tasks for them. Given the limited knowledge that companies often possess regarding the clinical challenges faced by individuals with psychological disabilities, it is crucial to situate this issue within the broader framework of activation policies that currently define the welfare system, including the role of family associations. These policies should be designed to empower

individuals and facilitate the activation of their skills and competences, with an emphasis on well-being (Giangreco, 2009). With regard to young people's training (e.g. upper secondary school, vocational training and university), an important action would be to inform people with disabilities about the opportunities for facilitated inclusion in companies. Better communication between the education sector and official bodies could lead to faster and more effective job placements (Anand *et al.*, 2018).

Digitalizing the system would also be of great help (Buer *et al.*, 2020). On the one hand, it would be useful to have an online portal where companies can check whether they are complying with the law or if they have to comply and by how much (perhaps indicating strategies or percentages they have to achieve). On the other hand, an online portal could be used to make supply and demand meet, at least initially; this would be followed by face-to-face meetings between disabled people and companies.

In general, the participants stressed the need for personalization and the creation of a system capable of considering the needs, constraints and potential of all the actors involved. Only by working towards this goal will the different parties be able to build relationships of trust from which everyone can benefit.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the process of integrating disabled people into companies in the Lombardy region from the employers' perspective. Law 68/1999 is dated and must be reformed. The study has highlighted how, in recent years, there has been a shift in the perception of job placements from "obligation" to "opportunity," both for disabled people and companies. The latter have developed an organizational culture that is much more sensitive and open, not only to work integration but also to the inclusion of disabled people, compared to before. However, they still have to invest considerably to improve their operations in this domain. At the same time, the results of the focus groups show the importance of the territorial network in achieving a successful targeted placement. This success does not depend solely on the relationship between the disabled person and the company. Associations, family associations, employment centers, agencies and schools are all important actors in the network that can contribute, for example, to the recruitment of disabled people (through targeted professional orientation courses in schools), to raising awareness of disability legislation and their rights and to accompanying the disabled person once he/she has joined a company (through tutoring services). The role of associations is also important in supporting families who have adult children with disabilities. In this case too, they can support them in understanding their children's employment rights or even indicate which services are present in the area that their children can access to seek employment opportunities. Simultaneously, because targeted placement cannot be solely resolved within the interaction between the disabled individual and the employer, efforts must be made to foster an inclusive corporate culture. This entails actions aimed at raising awareness within society as well.

This study is not representative of Italy as a whole. One of its limitations is that it concentrated on one region (Lombardy) and did not look at the entire country. In fact, it is known that regional differences in Italy are particularly pronounced and that each territory therefore has its own peculiarities. For this reason, the same study could be reproduced in other regions to then compare similarities and differences.

Future research perspectives

In order to have a more specific and comprehensive framework about the condition of disabled people at companies, future studies should involve more regions (possibly all of them). In addition, during our study, it was not possible to carry out statistically significant sampling,

despite the fact that useful criteria for selecting companies were used to construct a heterogeneous sample. A quantitative study could be carried out with a statistically significant sampling of companies in order to have a detailed representation of the companies' situation in Lombardy. Furthermore, it would be interesting to triangulate, interviewing the recipients of targeted placements, their families and caregivers, and realize an in-depth analysis and data collection of the actors who facilitate the process, such as employment agencies and centers. A network analysis would make the findings clearer, highlighting the strengths, weaknesses and improvements compared to the network model mainly active in the Lombardy region. In addition, a further avenue would be place greater emphasis on the theme of employment status and its longitudinal stability among disabled workers, considering the approach undertaken in a study conducted in Veneto by Lascioli and Meneogi in 2006.

Notes

1. Law n. 183/2014 (c.d. Jobs Act).
2. We highlight that “corporate social inclusion” means creating a work environment in which each individual is respected and has equality of opportunity, regardless of their personal differences. This involves corporate policies and practices designed to promote diversity and prevent discrimination. The goal is to foster creativity, innovation and organizational success through an environment where each employee can contribute fully without fear of bias or discrimination (Friso, 2013).
3. The research report is available at <https://www.assolombarda.it/servizi/lavoro-e-previdenza/informazioni/la-legge-68-99-nell2019esperienza-delle-imprese-di-assolombarda-e-degli-stakeholder-analisi-e-proposte-di-miglioramento>
4. The program agreements are agreements stipulated between the company and the employment agency for the coverage of the mandatory quota through the gradual inclusion of people with disabilities.
5. The study was carried out between 2020 and 2021.
6. “Diversity management” is a strategic approach used by organizations to manage and enhance diversity within their work environment. This concept is based on the understanding that organizations benefit from diversity among their employees, who may come from different cultural, ethnic, social, gender and generational backgrounds and have different skills and perspectives. Diversity management aims to create an environment in which each individual is respected, valued and can contribute to the success of the organization. This approach involves promoting inclusion, preventing discrimination and eliminating bias within the workplace. Organizations that implement diversity management often develop policies, programs and practices that promote equity in the hiring, promotion and training of employees. In addition, diversity management may also include raising awareness, training and educating employees on diversity issues (Mustafa *et al.*, 2019).
7. According to this article, people belonging to special categories have privileged access to jobs, and companies with more than 50 employees must reserve a certain percentage of places for them.
8. This applies to people who are no longer of working age and therefore employable or who have already found a stable job.

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